

French Intervention: British Failure to Anticipate Transition in the American War of Independence

A Monograph

by

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Abstract

French Intervention: British Failure to Anticipate Transition in the American War of Independence, by MAJ Derek J. Oberg, 45 pages

In 1763, Britain signed the Treaty of Paris ending the Seven Years War. Despite the treaty, tension between Britain and the Bourbon powers, France and Spain, remained high. The loss of colonial possessions and degradation of European power embarrassed both France and Spain, which began to rebuild their naval power in anticipation of another war with Britain. While the Bourbon powers rebuilt militarily, civil unrest was growing in the British colonies in America, placing Britain in a vulnerable position.

The situation in the American colonies gradually escalated from civil unrest to rebellion to a global war between European powers. From 1764 to 1775, Britain was unable to put an end to colonists' dissatisfaction with British rule and in 1775, a civil war between Britain and the American colonists began. British strategy relied on coercive power and did not account for the possibility of European intervention. Meanwhile, American diplomats aggressively pursued European support and in 1778, the French entered into a Franco-American alliance. French intervention had a significant impact on the context of the war. The American War of Independence was no longer a civil war; it became a global conflict with multiple fronts, marking a significant transition for the British both strategically and operationally.

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Acronyms

JP	Joint Publication
TRADOC	Training and Doctrine Command

Introduction

Transitions mark a change in focus in an ongoing military operation and can take place at the strategic, operational, or tactical levels of war. They are an important part of strategy; the ability to anticipate transitions can be the difference between success or failure. Additional actors entering a conflict, operational success or failure, and changes in domestic policy can all cause a transition. Throughout history, transitions have played a significant role in war and warfare. French intervention in the American War of Independence denoted a clear example of a transition, both operationally and strategically, for the British.¹

In a war where one belligerent is clearly stronger militarily, the weaker actor must often seek outside support to be able to compete with the stronger actor.² In the American War of Independence, the Americans were at a disadvantage both logistically and militarily. Logistically they lacked the capability to produce large quantities of arms, gunpowder, and ammunition and militarily they could not compete with the Royal Navy – arguably the best in the world.³ American political and military leaders recognized early that France was a potential ally, especially after losing territory and honor following the Seven Years War. American political leaders believed that if they could convince the French to support the war effort it would greatly increase their chance of success.⁴

¹ Joint Publication (JP 3-0), *Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2011), V-7.

² John J. McCuen, *The Art of Counter-Revolutionary War, the Strategy of Counter-Insurgency* (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1966), 64.

³ John R. Alden, *A History of the American Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 1969), 18.

⁴ James Hutson, *John Adams and the Diplomacy of the American Revolution* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2014), 16-17. In 1775, the Second Continental Congress decided if it declared independence, the colonies would seek alliances with “France, Spain, and any other Power of Europe.”

French intervention in the American War of Independence caused several problems for the British; not only did French intervention affect Britain's operational plan for military action in America, but it also had strategic implications. Britain's war to subdue the rebellion in America now became an international conflict with multiple fronts – America, Europe, the West Indies, coastal West Africa, and along the Indian littoral waters. Britain could no longer concentrate military forces and resources in the American colonies; it was now forced to redistribute naval and military assets across the globe to defend British interests.⁵

Transitions are a part of war and warfare, but they are not just a military concept. At the strategic level, actors must leverage the elements of national power – diplomatic, information, military, and economic means – to gain a position of advantage. Strategy is a continuous process that requires constant reassessment of an actor's current position in regards to the operational environment.⁶ Actors must anticipate the intentions of global competitors and develop strategies that places them in a position of advantage. Part of this process is the observation of trends and understanding changing conditions in the operational environment. During the American War of Independence, the British failed to anticipate the actions of their adversaries – both in the American colonies and in Europe. The most pronounced of these failures were the inability to acknowledge pending French intervention and develop a strategy to isolate the war to the Americas.⁷ The strategy adopted by the British after the Seven Years War played a major role in the inability to prevent the American War of Independence from escalating into a global conflict.

⁵ Piers Mackesy, *The War for America: 1775-1783* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), 166-179.

⁶ Everett Dolman, *Pure Strategy: Power and Principle in the Space and Information Age* (Burlington, MA: Routledge, 2005), 4.

⁷ Frans P.B. Osinga, *Science, Strategy and War: the Strategic Theory of John Boyd* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 233. Osinga asserts the importance of “systematic interaction and isolation” in “strategic behavior” in reference to John Boyd's OODA-Loop. British leadership could not conceptualize the importance of international relations and isolating the conflict in the American War of Independence.

Following the Seven Years War, the ministry and the crown turned their attention away from Europe, ignoring anything external to the British Empire. British measures to prevent the American rebellion from gaining outside support were limited, despite indicators that European powers – France and Spain – were actively seeking British vulnerabilities.⁸ It was not until the French intervened, however, that the British leveraged diplomatic means to seek an end to the rebellion. Long before, however, the Americans' desired endstate had drastically changed from the beginning of the rebellion. No longer did the Americans seek representation in the House of Commons; they now wanted independence and were unwilling to accept anything less.⁹

The British, however, are not the only actors that have failed to understand the importance of recognizing transitions. Military leaders and statesmen have continually failed to recognize, acknowledge, and adapt to meet changes caused by transitions. General Douglas MacArthur and President Harry Truman refused to recognize indicators of Chinese intervention in the Korean War and United Nations forces were in a poor disposition to defend against the waves of Chinese infantry that attacked in October 1950.¹⁰ In the contemporary operating environment, the United States struggled to recognize the growing insurgency in Iraq following the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and was left without an appropriate operational approach once the insurgency could no longer be ignored.¹¹ The failure to recognize transitions is not a new

⁸ Jonathan R. Dull, *A Diplomatic History of the American Revolution* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987), 9, 28, 29. France sent agents to the American colonies as early as 1764 to establish diplomatic relations and the naval build up by France and Spain was directly in response to British victory in the Seven Years War. Additionally, confrontations between Britain and the Bourbon powers persisted over colonial rights between 1763 and 1770.

⁹ Michael W. Jones and Donald Stoker, "Colonial Military Strategy," *Strategy in the American War of Independence: A Global Approach*, eds. Stoker, Donald, Kenneth J. Hagan and Michael T. McMaster (New York: Routledge, 2009), 5.

¹⁰ Allan R. Millet, *The War for Korea, 1950-1951: They Came from the North* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2010), 291.

¹¹ Daniel Bolger, *Why We Lost: A General's Inside Account of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2014), 183-184.

phenomenon, but one that will continue to challenge military practitioners and statesmen.

Studying the American War of Independence from a British perspective provides an excellent example of the difficulty of transitions.

Historiography

Historians have covered the American War of Independence in detail. Works range from detailed descriptions of battles and campaigns to narratives of world diplomacy during the eighteenth century. Historians across the spectrum recognize the significance of the French alliance – and eventually Spanish and Dutch intervention – and the role it played in the outcome of the war. However, most works do not adequately address the British inability to acknowledge and adapt to transitions during the war. Additionally, contemporary military practitioners have discounted the comparison of trends in British strategy during the American War of Independence to the resemblance of more contemporary trends – hybrid warfare and complexity.

Historians writing about the American War of Independence cover many common themes. All agree that the French actively sought British vulnerabilities. Where historians differ, however, is on what caused the French intervention. Authors focused on the operational level of war – campaigns in the American colonies – point to the battles of Saratoga as the catalyst that led to French intervention. Those that present a strategic narrative portray a scenario in which French intervention is dependent on European politics and the role of American diplomats.

Many historians have argued that the battles of Saratoga – Freeman Farms and Bemis Heights – were the “turning point” in the American War of Independence. Authors such as Richard Ketchum, Hoffman Nickerson, and John Luzadar argue that without a decisive British defeat at Saratoga, the French would not have provided direct military support to the American colonies. This view lends to glorifying American effort in military operations and the role of the

militia, which was unique in the context of the conflict, but undermines the significance of the role of the Seven Years War and European diplomacy between 1763 and 1778.¹²

Strategically focused historians have argued that the French were planning to enter the war regardless of American military success. Johnathan Dull asserts that French intervention was inevitable and points to the diplomatic interaction between the French and American diplomats in 1776, in which the French make it clear that they were interested in helping the Americans with more than material support. The Franco-American agreement in 1776, specifying that the Continental Congress would notify France before any peace negotiation provides strong evidence of impending French involvement. Additionally, internal correspondence between Louis XVI and Charles Gravier, Comte de Vergennes, the French Foreign Minister, offer evidence of the French interest in an independent America for French economic reasons.¹³

Pierce Mackesy's *War for America: 1775-1783*, provides an excellent overview of British strategy during the American War of Independence. He offers a complete account of the conflict, covering both the strategic context and the tactical operations in the American colonies. Mackesy asserts that French intervention was unavoidable due to French national interest following the Seven Years War. He argues that despite French intervention, the British could have been successful if they would have dedicated naval assets to the American colonies and assumed risk in the English Channel. Additionally, the British Army's poor strategy and the vast terrain in the American colonies also contributed to Britain's inability to subdue the colonies.¹⁴

¹² Richard M. Ketchum, *Saratoga: Turning Point of America's Revolutionary War* (New York: Holt, 1999), 1; John Luzader, *Saratoga: A Military History of the Decisive Campaign of the American Revolution* (New York: Savas Beatie, 2010), 339-340; Hoffman Nickerson, *The Turning Point of the Revolution or Burgoyne in America* (Cambridge, MA: The Riverside Press, 1928), 2-3.

¹³ Dull, *A Diplomatic History of the American Revolution*, 50-53.

¹⁴ Mackesy, *The War for America*, 512-518.

Many of the works focused on the American War of Independence downplay the significance of European foreign affairs during the war. Brendan Simms' *Three Victories and a Defeat: The Rise and Fall of the First British Empire* and *Europe: The Struggle for Supremacy*, describe the role American colonies played in the fight for dominance over Europe. The American War of Independence was a sideshow for European powers, an opportunity to exploit British internal struggles. The ultimate goal for all European actors was supremacy in Europe.¹⁵

In *The Men Who Lost America: British Leadership, the American Revolution, and the Fate of Empire*, Andrew Jackson O'Shaughnessy asserts that the British did not fail due to strategy, but because of "insufficient resources, unanticipated lack of loyalist support and the popularity of the revolution." This argument ignores Britain's lack of diplomatic effort and fails to address the pattern of miscalculations made by both military and political leaders. There is a distinct pattern throughout the war of British failure to observe trends in the operational environment and adjust their strategy accordingly. O'Shaughnessy does, however, present a very insightful assessment of individual leadership – British failure was not due to any one individual but a number of circumstances.¹⁶

Historians have also asked the question: how decisive was French intervention? There is no debate that French support greatly increased the military capability of the rebellion, through both material support and direct military support. However, the role of French intervention is another topic that divides historians. Jonathan Dull and Samuel Bemis maintain that without the French, the rebellion would have only been able to achieve a peace compromise and the American colonies would have been unable to reach a clear victory and independence.¹⁷ Others

¹⁵ Brendan Simms, *Europe: The Struggle for Supremacy, from 1453 to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), 123-131; Brendan Simms, *Three Victories and a Defeat: The Rise and Fall of the First British Empire* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 585.

¹⁶ Andrew Jackson O'Shaughnessy, *The Men Who Lost America: British Leadership, the American Revolution, and the Fate of the Empire* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 353.

¹⁷ Jonathan R. Dull, "French and the American Revolution Seen as Tragedy," *Diplomacy*

historians, such as John Alder and Don Higginbotham, contend that American resolve could have eventually depleted British resources and led to victory.¹⁸ Despite the difference in opinion on the significance of French intervention, it presents an excellent topic of study for the military practitioner.

The early study of operational art steers military practitioners towards the Napoleonic Wars, the Franco-Austrian War, the American Civil War, and the World Wars of the twentieth century. These conflicts present clear examples of defined strategic aims, the evolution of decentralized operations, and commanders maneuvering multiple forces to accomplish a single strategic goal.¹⁹ While, there were many advancements in war and warfare in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the British strategy in the American War of Independence is filled with examples of not only operational art, but of issues that military practitioners struggle with in the contemporary environment; such as hybrid warfare, a complex strategic operating environment, and non-state actors. All these elements contribute to the difficulty of addressing transitions and the importance of transitions in strategy. This concept is lost in the current historiography of the American War of Independence.

and Revolution: The Franco-American Alliance of 1778, eds. Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1981), 73; Samuel Flagg Bemis, *The Diplomacy of the American Revolution* (New York: American Historical Association, 1935), vii-viii, 86.

¹⁸ John R. Alden, *A History of the American Revolution*, 245. Alden asserts “It is even quite possible that they would have gained their independence without the help of the French – and Spanish – armies and navies”; Don Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence: Military Attitudes, Policies, and Practice, 1763-1789*, repr. ed. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1983), 432. The author states that “regardless of formal French intervention, Britain had slight chance of permanently subduing America.”

¹⁹ Robert M. Epstein, *Napoleon’s Last Victory and the Emergence of Modern War* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1994), 3; James Schneider, “The Loose Marble—and the Origins of Operational Art,” *Parameters* 19 (March 1989): 90.

Unrest in America

The American War of Independence gradually escalated through a series of transitions before ending as an element in a larger international conflict. Civil unrest escalated to an insurgency, insurgency to civil war, and finally to an interstate conflict when France entered the war in 1778. French intervention is the most pronounced and well-recognized strategic transition in the war, but it was a series of more subtle tactical and operational transitions that granted the French the opportunity to take advantage of British vulnerability in 1778. The ministry and the crown failed to develop contextual intelligence during the period of gradual escalation between the Seven Years War and the onset of civil war in 1775 and never understood the rebellion.²⁰ Despite warnings from military leaders and Tory governors and the political organization of the Whigs, the emergence of an insurgency took the crown by surprise.²¹ Once the Americans organized and developed a legislative body and a nationalized army, the Continental Congress and the Continental Army, the conflict once again transitioned into a civil war against a hybrid enemy, composed of the Continental Army and various local militias. Additionally, the American rebellion's strategic objectives evolved. Many in the rebellion's leadership initially wanted representation in Parliament, but when Britain refused to grant the request, the American political objective shifted to independence.

Operating as an independent state, American diplomats aggressively pursued European support for their cause.²² The idea of rebellious European colonies was displeasing to European monarchs, but the vulnerability of the British and the success of the American Rebellion were too attractive for the French to resist. In 1778, the French entered into a Franco-American alliance,

²⁰ Joseph S. Nye Jr., *The Future of Power*, repr. ed. (New York: PublicAffairs, 2011), 4. Contextual intelligence is described by Nye as “the ability to understand an evolving environment and capitalize on trends”.

²¹ Marion Balderston, and David Syrett, eds, *The Lost War: Letters from British Officers During the American Revolution* (New York: Horizon Press, 1975), 27.

²² Jonathan R. Dull, *A Diplomatic History of the American Revolution*, 6-8.

escalating the war into a global conflict. Two British strategic failures led to French intervention: British failure to develop a strategy to isolate the conflict to the American colonies and the failure to acknowledge French intentions to enter the American War of Independence.

The British Struggle to Isolate the Conflict

The American War of Independence presented a number of challenges to the British. The gradual escalation of unrest made it difficult to understand the changing operational environment and the vast spans of territory made controlling the colonies problematic. From the end of the Seven Years War to the beginning of direct military support by European powers, the British were never able to develop a strategy to isolate the conflict and prevent European intervention. During the early stages of the war, British leaders acted without consideration of the colonists. As the conflict escalated, Britain's lack of understanding of the American colonies was evident in the actions of the crown, Parliament, and the ministry. The British strategy to isolate the conflict relied on the belief that the rebellion could be quickly subdued through coercive measures – and brute force if necessary – and the Royal Navy would provide the capability to blockade the colonies and prevent them from receiving outside material support. Neither of these strategies proved effective. The British struggled to understand the growing unrest in the colonies and develop a strategy to subdue the rebellion in a timely manner.

Tensions between Britain and the American colonies began at the conclusion of the Seven Years War with the implementation of the Proclamation Line and the garrisoning of British soldiers in the Mississippi and Ohio River valleys. The Proclamation Line of 1763 was a response to Pontiac's raids on British settlements in the spring of 1763. It declared that colonists under British rule would not settle west of the Appalachian Mountains. British leaders feared continued conflict with Indian tribes and hoped to ease tensions between the colonists and Indians. The Proclamation Line frustrated colonists who were hoping to settle in the Ohio and Mississippi valleys. The colonists felt that after the French and Indians had been defeated, they had the right

to occupy that land. From the British government's perspective, they were simply trying to protect the colonist and reduce imperial expenditures, but that was not the perception in America.²³ Colonists viewed the occupation as a useless military expense and felt they were capable of defending themselves.²⁴

Containing the American colonies following the Seven Years War was not the only British concern in the Americas. The Seven Years War proved to be very expensive, and British debt soared from £70 million to £140 million.²⁵ Parliament thought the American colonies should shoulder some of the financial responsibility of the war, especially because the colonists benefited greatly from the outcome of the conflict.²⁶ In 1764, Parliament implemented the first in a series of new tax measures, the Sugar Act, placing a heavy tax on non-British produced sugar and molasses, giving British sugar planters a monopoly on trade with the colonies. The Stamp Act followed in 1765, inciting protest among both colonists and British businessmen, who relied on trade with the colonies. British officials did not intend for these measures to be punitive; Parliament and the ministry simply wanted to reduce Britain's financial burden. In 1766, the British Prime Minister, George Grenville, modified the Sugar and repealed the Stamp Act, but in 1767, Parliament implemented the Townshend Act. The Townshend Act imposed customs duties on a number of goods, causing further outrage in the colonies. These taxes were not unique to the American colonies. Parliament levied similar taxes in on other British colonies, but other

²³ Allan R. Millett & Peter Maslowski, *For the Common Defense: A Military History of the United States of America from the Revolutionary War through Today*, rev. ed. (New York: Free Press, 2012), 44-45.

²⁴ Eliga H. Gould, "Fears of War, Fantasies of Peace," *Empire and Nation: The American Revolution in the Atlantic World*, eds. Eliga H. Gould and Peter S. Onuf, repr. ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), 26.

²⁵ Simms, *Three Victories and a Defeat*, 535.

²⁶ O'Shaughnessy, *The Men Who Lost America*, 49-50.

colonists did not react with the same staunch opposition as the Americans.²⁷ British statesmen and military leaders were unable to differentiate the between the culture of American colonies and other British colonial possessions.

The Sugar Act outraged American political leaders such as Benjamin Franklin and John Adams. They interpreted the Sugar Act as coercive support for the British sugar planters in the West Indies – the most powerful colonial lobby in Parliament. Franklin and Adams thought that the American colonies were being sacrificed to please the wealthy sugar planters and make up for their inability to compete with French and Spanish planters, who held much more productive islands in the Caribbean. The most powerful lobbyist group in the American colonies was the southern tobacco farmers, but tobacco lacked the profitability of sugar and tobacco farmers held little influence in parliament.²⁸ Americans perceived these acts as economic coercion, became hostile towards British customs officials, and boycotted British goods.²⁹

In response to the growing instability, the ministry deployed British soldiers to Boston in 1768.³⁰ The deployment of soldiers into Boston was much different from the garrisoning of soldiers in the Ohio and Mississippi valleys following the Seven Years War. The intent of the Boston garrison was to prevent unrest in the colonies, not protect the colonists from external threats such as the French and Indians. The occupation of Boston clearly indicated that the British intended to use military force to control the colonists and enforce the taxes emplaced by

²⁷ Simms, *Three Victories and a Defeat*, 536-538.

²⁸ Andrew Jackson O'Shaughnessy, *An Empire Divided: The American Revolution and the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 15, 17, 65-66.

²⁹ Jeremy Black, *War for America: The Fight for Independence, 1775-1783* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), 9.

³⁰ George Germain to General Irwin, 10 August 1768, *Historical Manuscripts Commission, Report on the Manuscripts of Mrs. Stopford-Sackville of Drayton House, Northamptonshire* (London: His Majesty's Stationary Office, 1904-1910), 127.

Parliament.³¹ Tensions between British soldiers and American colonists continued to grow and became worse when Parliament implemented new coercive economic measures in 1773.

In 1773, Parliament took control of the East India Company. The company had gone bankrupt in 1772 and due to its importance to the British economy the government took control to help it recover. Shortly after, Parliament enacted the Tea Act of 1773. Parliament intended The Tea Act to force colonies to purchase British tea from the East India Tea Company. Like the Sugar Act, the Tea Act sent a message to the colonist that coercive taxes were being placed on them to benefit wealthy British businessmen who had influence in Parliament and financial interest in the East India Company. The Tea Act resulted in the Boston Tea Party, when on 17 December 1773, members of the Sons of Liberty raided a ship owned by the East India Company and dumped tea overboard.³² The Boston Tea Party infuriated Parliament and united the British government against the rebellion. King George III, who previously was sympathetic to the American colonies, became enraged by what he viewed as a treasonous act. Any chance of ending the rebellion by negotiation was lost and the crown turned to military means exclusively to bring stability to the colonies. Despite the unrest, George believed that only small numbers of the colonists were rebellious and that any organized rebellion could be defeated quickly and without a serious commitment from the British military.³³ Correspondence from General Thomas Gage, the commanding general in the American colonies, confirmed the king's belief.

Gage's assessment of the colonies in 1774 was not disheartening. Colonists rioted after the Stamp Act in 1765, but once the initial shock of the act wore off, most moderate colonists learned to deal with the series of taxes that followed. There was no indicator that The Boston Tea Party would be any different from previous riots in the colonies. In the winter of 1774 to 1775,

³¹ Alde, *A History of the American Revolution*, 102-107.

³² Simms, *Three Victories and a Defeat*, 546-548.

³³ Alden, *A History of the American Revolution*, 146.

Loyalists who had left the city began to return to Boston, leading Gage to send a positive evaluation of the situation to London.³⁴ Gage's assessment of the situation in New England drastically changed by the spring of 1775; he became convinced that the rebellion was growing in power and influence. Gage tried to warn the ministry that there was unrest in the colonies and the rebellion was gaining power politically and perhaps even militarily, but the ministry ignored his warnings.³⁵

British statesmen largely believed that the majority of Americans were still loyal to the crown and once British soldiers were able to enforce order, Loyalists would be able to regain control over the colonies. Loyalists, however, faced many challenges that were not apparent to British military leaders and much less apparent to those that had never been to the colonies, namely George and George Germain, the Secretary of the Americas. Rebel groups, such as the Sons of Liberty, intimidated and harassed loyalists in the northern colonies, while militant groups of Whigs in the southern colonies tormented Loyalist farmers. The British began a habit of miscalculating Loyalist strength and underestimating the will of the rebellion, which played a significant role in Gage's decisions and the beginning of open hostilities between the British and the American rebellion in April 1775.³⁶

Gage, detecting the growing power and influence of the rebellion, determined the British needed to use military means to subdue and disarm the colonist. He wrote Lord Barrington, the Secretary of War, requesting permission to execute offensive operations to seize weapons and capture rebel political leaders. In April 1775, Gage learned from an informant that the Continental Congress had ordered the formation of a Continental Army and grew concerned about the

³⁴ John R. Galvin, *The Minute Men: the First Fight: Myths and Realities of the American Revolution*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: Brassey's, 1989), 91, 95.

³⁵ Alden, *A History of the American Revolution*, 150-152.

³⁶ Mackesy, *The War for America*, 36-37.

possibility of conflict. On 14 April 1775, Gage received correspondence from London encouraging him to conduct military operations against the rebellion. Armed with the location of a Continental cache in Concord, Gage ordered a battalion sized task force under Lieutenant Colonel Francis, to march on Concord and destroy the weapons. The result was the Battles of Lexington and Concord and the rout of British forces during the march back to Boston.³⁷

The battles of Lexington and Concord marked a major operational transition for both the British and the Americans. Prior to 19 April 1775, there were no open hostilities between the rebellion and British soldiers, only civil unrest. The conflict escalated and the British were now involved in a colonial civil war. Strategically, the British aims remained to subdue the rebellion and restore the colonies' loyalty to the crown, but operational objectives and tactical actions in the Americas changed dramatically. British soldiers were no longer a peacekeeping force. Germain immediately argued for an aggressive offensive to punish the rebellion and restore order.³⁸ Whether Gage knew it or not, he had begun a civil war within the British Empire, which would last well beyond 1775.³⁹

Following the skirmishes at Lexington and Concord, American militia and the newly formed Continental Army fortified Boston and prepared for a British attack. On 17 June 1775, the British attacked American positions on Breed's Hill and Bunker Hill. General William Howe, who recently assumed command from Gage, led the attack and seized the terrain from the American defenders, but not after suffering substantial casualties and humiliation. The British military leaders all believed that once the Americans faced a professional European army in battle they would retreat. This was not the case; the Americans stood their ground and fought. The

³⁷ Galvin, *The Minute Men*, 93-100.

³⁸ Germain to Irwin, 29 June 1775, *Report on the Manuscripts of Mrs. Stopford-Sackville of Drayton House*, 127.

³⁹ Black, *War for America*, 84-86.

British gained control of Boston in the summer of 1775, but Americans had proved they could effectively muster organized resistance. They massed an effective irregular force during the British retrograde from Concord and stood their ground at Bunker Hill, fighting a pitched battle against a professional European army. Despite the success of the rebels, British views towards the use of military force to subdue the rebellion did not change.⁴⁰ In the months after the battles of Bunker Hill, American forces laid siege to Boston, but the Royal Navy still controlled the American coastline and prevented the complete isolation of the city.

Part of the British strategy to isolate the colonies involved a naval blockade to prevent the rebellion from receiving military support from Europe. In 1775, Parliament passed the Prohibitory Act, intended to stop military support from entering the colonies and punish the colonies economically by blocking trade. There were three issues with this strategy: the Royal Navy's global responsibilities, the size of the American coastline, and the multiple roles the Royal Navy was required to fill in America. Defending the British homeland and Britain's numerous colonial possessions stretched the Royal Navy thin. The Royal Navy had to protect British colonies in India, Africa, the West Indies, and Central and South America. Additionally, the Earl of Sandwich, the First Lord of the Admiralty, and Germain could not agree on the appropriate naval force for the American war. Germain fought to make the American colonies the Royal Navy's main effort, but Sandwich wanted to focus the fleet's efforts on control of the English Channel and defending Britain against the growing naval threat from France and Spain. The result was only a third of the Royal Navy dedicated to the American War of Independence and not all of those ships were available to enforce the blockade.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Black, *War for America*, 73-75.

⁴¹ John Reeve, "British Naval Strategy," *Strategy in the American War of Independence: A Global Approach*, eds. Donald Stoker, Kenneth J. Hagan, and Michael T. McMaster (New York: Routledge, 2009), 76-77, 82.

In the Americas, the Royal Navy had multiple roles to fill with limited assets. It was required to enforce the blockade, support the British Army, escort merchant ships, and provide asylum for Tory politicians who had been forced to abandon their positions. This left few ships dedicated to enforcing the blockade. Limited assets, coupled with the vast American coastline, made the blockade ineffective. European traders and American privateers were able to penetrate the blockade with ease. Additionally, British ships had to be careful to avoid antagonizing France or neutral European states such as the Netherlands. The French took advantage of the British predicament, using Dutch traders to transport arms from Dutch colonial possessions in the Caribbean to the American Colonies. American privateers often sailed under a French flag, knowing that the Royal Navy would be hesitant to engage a French ship for fear of sparking a global conflict.⁴² While the blockade was ineffective, the Royal Navy's dominance of the American littorals did allow Britain freedom of movement on the Atlantic Ocean, assisting them in breaking the siege at Boston.

The siege of Boston was eventually successful and forced the British to withdraw from Boston. On 17 March 1776, British forces loaded cargo ships and sailed to Halifax to regroup and prepare to execute an attack in the summer of 1776. In absence of the British military, Whig governors took control of the British colonies, negating Tory influence in American governance.⁴³ During this same time, George declared the American colonies in a state of rebellion. This placed the British in a vulnerable position in Europe, advertising its inability to control a major colony. Since the end of the Seven Years War, the British had failed to establish meaningful alliances in Europe.⁴⁴ There was no European power to provide a threat to France in

⁴² Reeve, "British Naval Strategy," 82-83.

⁴³ David Hackett Fischer, *Washington's Crossing*, repr. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 89-114.

⁴⁴ Dull, *A Diplomatic History of the American Revolution*, 5.

Europe. The French had been waiting for an opportunity to intervene in British affairs since the end of the Seven Year War and now that opportunity was presenting itself.⁴⁵ The possibility of isolating the conflict to the American colonies was slipping away from the British.

In late December 1775, French agents arrived in Philadelphia and negotiated an agreement with the Continental Congress to provide military supplies to the colonies. The French representatives took the proposed agreement back to France and by early 1776 Comte de Vergennes, the French Foreign Minister, informed Arthur Lee, an American diplomat in France, the French intended to begin arms shipments to the colonies. Vergennes planned to ship the arms from the Netherlands, through the Dutch Caribbean island St. Eustatius, to avoid British naval forces patrolling the European coast. The Netherlands was on neutral terms with the British and enjoyed freedom to engage in international trade without harassment from British war ships. This was the first form of trade between the colonies and foreign states. It also indicated a new French foreign policy; actively supporting the American rebellion.⁴⁶ The American colonies were now receiving direct support from Europe despite British attempts to blockade the colonies and subdue the rebellion quickly.

In the spring of 1776, the American Whigs were in a position of power. American forces had achieved victory at Lexington and Concord, seized Fort Ticonderoga, embarrassed the British at the Battle of Bunker Hill, forced the British out of Boston, and began an effective diplomatic effort to seek European support. The situation in the American colonies divided British leaders. Some still felt the emerging war was not as serious as it appeared. General Howe, now the senior Army commander in the colonies, thought only a small part of the population was supportive of the rebellion. Germain and the king still thought one decisive battle would end the conflict.

⁴⁵ Reeve, "British Naval Strategy," 75.

⁴⁶ Samuel Flagg Bemis, *The Diplomacy of the American Revolution* (New York: American Historical Association, 1935), 36.

Others were deeply concerned by the events of 1775. Lord Barrington, the Secretary of War, expressed concern that there was no military solution to the rebellion. He was worried about troop dispositions and the lack of infantry soldiers available to maintain control in America; assuming that Britain would regain control in 1776. On the domestic front, the British elite recognized the importance of the colonies to the British economy and feared tax hikes if the colonies were lost. Britain faced a difficult set of circumstances in the American colonies, without the threat of outside support for the rebellion.⁴⁷

By 1776, Germain was well aware of the possibility of French intervention. Germain believed that the threat of French intervention called for a more aggressive military strategy. His strategy was to win a decisive victory over the Americans to establish a more advantageous position to negotiate with the Continental Congress. The flaw in this British strategy was that military means remained the only instrument of power employed. George remained fixated on not ceding anything to the Americans. The conflict had become personal for the king. He argued that if Britain lost the American colonies, it would start a domino effect in the British Empire and other colonies would begin to rebel. He was especially concerned about losing the British West Indies, which were arguably Britain's most valuable colonial possession.⁴⁸ While the king and Germain pressed for a more aggressive approach, Howe was in Halifax preparing for an offensive operation to reestablish a British foothold in the American colonies.

Howe determined he needed to seize a coastal city as a base for British operations. Howe, with encouragement from Germain, selected New York City. New York City was ideal due to the extensive ports, geographical location between the northern and southern colonies, control of the mouth of the Hudson River, and the high population of Loyalists. Howe and Germain decided the British Army and Royal Navy would execute a joint attack to seize New York City in the summer

⁴⁷ Mackesy, *The War for America*, 36-40.

⁴⁸ O'Shaughnessy, *The Men Who Lost America*, 29-30.

of 1776.⁴⁹ From 21 August 1776 to 15 November 1776, the British and Hessian troops systematically defeated the Continental forces defending New York City in a series of battles. Unlike their performance in 1775, the American forces performed poorly during the New York campaign. Continental soldiers fled at the battles of Guana and Brooklyn Heights and were ineffective in defending fortified positions, such as Fort Lee and Fort Washington. The poor performance of the Continental Army reinforced the idea that the rebellion could easily be subdued with military force. The British campaign to take New York City culminated with General Cornwallis pursuing General Washington through New Jersey and General Clinton leading a force to occupy Rhode Island.⁵⁰

By the end of 1776, the British had regained control of three colonies: New York, New Jersey, and Rhode Island. The poor performance by the Continental Army during the campaign for New York City encouraged British military leaders that operations in 1777 would be limited to small-scale operations aimed at defeated and remaining elements of the Continental Army. Despite minor victories in the fall of 1776 – the Americans succeeded in stopping Sir Guy Carleton's attack down Lake Champlain and Washington had retreated across the Delaware River – Washington's Army had no more than 3000 regular soldiers left and were on the brink of defeat.⁵¹ Germain, Lord North, and George believed that the unpleasantness in the American colonies had been contained and British diplomats were stagnant in Europe in 1776. The fear of French intervention was gone; by the summer of 1777, the crown believed that hostilities would cease and the British military would restore the status quo to the American colonies.⁵² 1776 was

⁴⁹ O'Shaughnessy, *The Men Who Lost America*, 174-176.

⁵⁰ Fischer, *Washington's Crossing*, 89-114.

⁵¹ Allan R. Millett and Peter Maslowski, *For the Common Defense: A Military History of the United States of America from the Revolutionary War through Today*, rev. ed. (New York: Free Press, 2012), 61-62.

⁵² Ira D. Gruber, *The Howe Brothers and the American Revolution* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1975), 143; David McCullough, *1776* (New York: Simon & Schuster,

the best chance the British had to defeating the rebellion with military force. Soon the initiative would shift back to the Americans, ending the possibility of ending the war with a military solution.

In the winter of 1776-1777, American luck changed dramatically. Washington – understanding that he needed a short-term victory to keep the Continental Army together – launched a series of raids, crossing the Delaware River from Pennsylvania into New Jersey, defeating a Hessian garrison at Trenton and a British force at Princeton. The risky raids were not only a military victory, but also an information victory. News of the Continental victories rapidly spread through the colonies, sparking increases in recruitment for both the Continental Army and local militias.⁵³ Local militias, empowered by the perceived shift in initiative, increased their activity and ruthlessly pursued British foraging parties in New Jersey. Washington was frustrated with the lack of control he had over the militias, but could not question their effectiveness in disrupting British operations.⁵⁴ The British belief that they would be able to quickly defeat the rebellion and isolate the conflict was becoming less and less likely.

By January 1777, General Howe realized the situation had changed. Despite the crown's confidence that the British were still on the verge of breaking the rebellion, Howe interpreted the situation much differently. The Americans were becoming a more formidable military force and he did not see the possibility of terminating the war anytime soon. On 31 January 1777, he sent a letter to Germain, requesting 20,000 more soldiers. Despite his concerns, Howe never adequately communicated his observations and the concerns of his subordinates to Germain, who was about to authorize the most ambitious operation of the American War of Independence.⁵⁵

2006), 247.

⁵³ John K. Mahon, *History of the Militia and the National Guard* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1983), 39.

⁵⁴ Fischer, *Washington's Crossing*, 212-251, 259-260, 276, 343, 347.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 359-364.

During the winter of 1776-1777, General John Burgoyne, the commanding general of British forces in Canada, proposed an ambitious attack to secure control of the Hudson River valley and isolate New England. George, who viewed the rebellious New England population as the center of the gravity for the rebellion, approved the proposed plan. Burgoyne planned to lead an attack from Canada, down Lake Champlain, and converge with Howe's army in Albany. The operation was reliant on Howe's cooperation, but Howe had his own ideas on how the war should be prosecuted in 1777. Howe planned on attacking Philadelphia and using an economy of force under General Clinton to secure New York and the lower reaches of the Hudson River. Germain approved Burgoyne's campaign and sent correspondence to Howe encouraging him to assist Burgoyne, but never issued clear orders for Howe to march on Albany.⁵⁶

Burgoyne launched his campaign on 20 June 1777 from the northern shore of Lake Champlain. Despite easily seizing Fort Ticonderoga, the next two months resulted in a series of British defeats in small skirmishes fought throughout the northeast wilderness. American militia decisively defeated a Hessian foraging party at the Battle of Bennington and Benedict Arnold defeated Colonel Barry St. Leger in the Mohawk Valley, forcing him to retreat to Canada. By late summer, Burgoyne's lines of communication were under constant attack by American militia, and he had no choice but to continue his attack towards Albany. Burgoyne crossed the Hudson River on 18 September 1777 and on 19 September 1777, engaged American forces in the Battle of Freeman Farms. Burgoyne was first defeated at Battle of Freeman Farms and subsequently at the Battle of Bemis Heights on 07 October 1777. The battles, known as the Battles of Saratoga, forced Burgoyne to surrender to the commander of the Northern Department of the Continental Army, General Horatio Gates, on 17 October 1777, ending Burgoyne's campaign to seize Albany and control the Hudson River.⁵⁷ While Howe did not succumb to the same fate as Burgoyne, his

⁵⁶ Luzader, *Saratoga*, 18-19.

⁵⁷ Mackesy, *The War for America*, 130-141.

operation failed to accomplish any meaningful objective.

Delay and odd decisions marred Howe's operation to seize Philadelphia. Fearing Washington's Army on his western flank, Howe made the decision to attack Philadelphia from the sea. Howe's army embarked on ships in mid-July 1777 and spent more than a month at sea before landing in Chesapeake Bay on 25 August 1777. He marched on Philadelphia, easily seizing the city, but the Continental Congress had displaced months before, relocating to Baltimore.⁵⁸ At the conclusion of Howe's campaign, the British commander-in-chief had lost confidence in obtaining a British victory in a timely manner. He recognized that Britain was engaged in a protracted war and lacked the manpower needed to control the colonies. On 23 October 1777, he wrote Germain expressing his concern and requesting that he be removed from command and succeeded by General Clinton; a request that Germain granted in the spring of 1778.⁵⁹

The 1777 campaign demonstrated the British failure to understand the rebellion and develop a unified operational approach. Burgoyne sought to isolate New England and subdue the rebellious population – viewed by King George as the source of the rebellions power. Howe, however, never intended to go to Albany and did not understand the intent of Burgoyne's operation. Furthermore, despite repeatedly asserting that victory was dependent on a decisive victory over Washington, Howe chose a territorial based approach and pursued seizing a “congress-less Philadelphia”.⁶⁰

In addition to Britain's inability to achieve a decisive victory in 1777, Spain began to provide logistical support to the rebellion through the Mississippi River Valley. King Charles and

⁵⁸ David Smith, *William Howe and the American War of Independence* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 156-158.

⁵⁹ William Howe to George Germain, 23 October 1777, *Documents of the American Revolution 1770-1783, XIV*, ed. K.G. Davies (Dublin: Irish University Press, 1976), 242-243.

⁶⁰ Smith, *William Howe and the American War of Independence*, 151, 155, 161.

Conde de Floridablanca, the newly appointed minister of state, were concerned about the security of Louisiana if the Americans gained independence from Britain. Floridablanca wanted to make sure to keep on good terms with Spain's American neighbors. Bernardo de Galvez, the governor of Louisiana, provided the Continental Army with gunpowder, cloth and medicine and offered detachments of Continental soldiers and militiamen housing in New Orleans. This created tension between the Spanish colony and British colony in West Florida. By the end of 1777, the rebellion was receiving logistical support from both Bourbon powers and had achieved a decisive victory over the Burgoyne's army at the Battles of Saratoga. The possibility of direct military intervention from Europe was becoming a possibility.⁶¹

The crown had no choice now but to accept that Britain was on the verge of a global conflict. The military effort to subdue the rebellion and isolate the conflict had failed. In March 1778, Germain sent guidance to Clinton outlining his strategy for the next year. Germain instructed Clinton to attempt to hold Philadelphia if he could, and if unable to hold Philadelphia, to withdraw to coastal towns and establish a defense to prepare for French intervention. George and Germain conceded that with the forces available in the colonies, operations in the immediate future would be limited to defensive operations.⁶² This was the first time since the war started that British leaders began to view the war as a global conflict. Clinton abandoned Philadelphia and prepared for French intervention.

The defense of British possessions in the West Indies was a priority for the British. The proximity of French colonies made the British West Indies especially vulnerable and the French had much greater land forces prepositioned in the Caribbean. In 1778, there were only 1,000 British soldiers in the Caribbean compared to 8,000 French troops. The French launched an attack

⁶¹ Light Townsend Cummins, *Spanish Observers and the American Revolution, 1775-1783* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 82-91.

⁶² Mackesy, *The War for America*, 155-158.

on Dominica in September 1778, easily taking the small British garrison before the British could send reinforcements. The shortage of soldiers in the Caribbean was one of the factors that influenced Clinton's decision to abandon Philadelphia; he needed to preserve troops to accommodate an attack on the French island of St Lucia. Naval power was still the primary means to allow the British to maintain control of their colonies, but the navy was beginning to become overstretched.⁶³

In the American colonies, the British still could not abandon the thought of defeating the rebellion with military force. With French intervention underway, Clinton and Germain turned their attention to the southern colonies, which they projected to have a higher population of Loyalists. In the fall of 1778, Clinton ordered Lieutenant Colonel Archibald Campbell to embark on a campaign to pacify Georgia and raise Loyalist support. Campbell easily took Savannah and then in December 1778, Clinton captured Charleston, defeating General Benjamin Lincoln and returning British control to South Carolina. Clinton turned over command of the southern colonies to Cornwallis and returned to New York. Over the next year and a half, Cornwallis gradually spread British control throughout the south, building a series of forts in Georgia and South Carolina and recruiting Loyalists. He planned to use the Loyalists militia to secure the southern colonies, freeing British troops to launch an offensive north towards the Hudson. Issues quickly arose with the conduct of the Loyalists militias. Loyalist militias in the Carolinas pillaged and plundered without discrimination, driving colonists to support the rebellion. In combat, rebel militias habitually defeated Loyalist units in North and South Carolina. Cornwallis feared that without an aggressive offensive, the rebel militias would gain the initiative and eventually threaten British control of South Carolina and Georgia.⁶⁴ While the British forces focused on the

⁶³ O'Shaughnessy, *The Men Who Lost America*, 294-295.

⁶⁴ Ricardo A. Herrera, "The King's Friends," *Strategy in the American War of Independence: A Global Approach*, eds. Donald Stoker, Kenneth J. Hagan, and Michael T. McMaster (New York: Routledge, 2009), 112-114.

southern coastal colonies, Spain made the decision to enter the war.

In June 1779, Spain declared war on Britain. Spain had maintained a neutral stance, despite pressure from Vergennes, Franklin, and Lee to enter the Franco-American alliance. When Spain entered the American War of Independence, it still refused to recognize the United States as an independent state. Floridablanca and Charles feared that if the United States gained independence and power it would challenge Spain for supremacy of Central and South America. When Spain entered the American War of Independence, it immediately went on the offensive, attacking British settlements along the Mississippi River and by August 1779, Spain controlled the lower Mississippi. Additionally, Spanish forces seized British territory on the Mosquito Coast, Belize, Roatan and the Bahama Islands. By 1782, the Bahama Islands belonged to the Spanish. Spain did not have a direct role in combat in the American colonies, but Spanish operations along the Mississippi, in Central America, and the West Indies denied the British the ability to concentrate forces in the American colonies.⁶⁵ Not only had Britain failed to isolate the conflict, but the conflict now was a global war with multiple fronts. Despite being at war with France, Spain, and the American rebellion, the British declared war on the Netherlands, further stretching the Royal Navy.

On 20 December 1780, Britain declared war on the Netherlands in an attempt to halt the shipment of military goods to France, Spain, and America. The Dutch West Indies – specifically St. Eustatius and St. Martin – had played a significant role in supplying the Continental Army with gunpowder and arms. On 03 February 1780, Admiral Sir George Rodney attacked St. Eustatius taking the Dutch and American merchants by surprise. The British found huge stores of military supplies, all bound for the American colonies. British soldiers and sailors raided indiscriminately, even destroying the property of British citizens and sympathizers on the island. The British only spared the sugar planter from the pillaging due to their international status of

⁶⁵ Cummins, *Spanish Observers and the American Revolution, 1775-1783*, 113-114.

power and wealth. The conduct of British soldiers and sailors at St. Eustatius raised concern in Europe and London. Parliament was outraged at behavior of the British military and European states viewed the pillaging as a violation of European norms. The actions of Rodney at St. Eustatius further alienated the British from the international community and became a distraction for military operations.⁶⁶ The British had lost control of the Mississippi River valley and were fighting to maintain their possessions in the West Indies, but once again British commanders and statesmen turned to an aggressive military strategy.

Cornwallis consolidated the British regulars in his command and attacked north, leaving the security of South Carolina and Georgia to the Loyalist militias. Cornwallis's lines of communication were constantly under attack from rebel militia. By the winter of 1781, the Continental Army reinforced the Southern Department with Major General Nathaniel Green and Brigadier General Daniel Morgan, two experienced militia commanders. Morgan decisively defeated Lieutenant Colonel Tarleton at Cowpens on 17 January 1781 and Green lured Cornwallis into a pursuit north into Virginia. Cornwallis' pursuit would eventually bring him to battle with a combined Anglo-Franco force at Yorktown. In the end, neither Clinton nor Cornwallis was unable to put a strategy together that effectively control the southern colonies.⁶⁷

Yorktown marked the highlight of the Franco-American alliance. Following the battle, the French shifted their operations to the Caribbean. De Grasse refused to support Washington's operations to attack South Carolina and Georgia. Cornwallis' surrender led to the downfall of Lord North and in March 1782, the Marquess of Rockingham replaced him as the Prime Minister. Rockingham immediately began to search for a way to end the conflict. The protracted war lacked domestic support and there was no end in sight without a negotiated solution.⁶⁸ Britain had

⁶⁶ O'Shaughnessy, *The Men Who Lost America*, 297-306.

⁶⁷ Herrera, "The King's Friends," 114-115.

⁶⁸ Jeremy Black, "British Military Strategy," *Strategy in the American War of Independence: A Global Approach*, eds. Donald Stoker, Kenneth J. Hagan, and Michael T.

failed to put a strategy together to quickly defeat the rebellion and isolate the conflict. The strategy of coercion and brute force, paired with a naval blockade, proved ineffective in isolating the conflict.

Acknowledging French Intentions

In addition to the inability to subdue the rebellion with military force or effectively blockade the colonies, the British failed to recognize the effectiveness of American diplomats in Europe and address the possibility of European intervention. British statesmen were aware of the Bourbon powers' desire to wage war against British, but they failed to incorporate the threat into a viable strategy aimed at the Americas. British neglect of European affairs began following the Seven Years War and did not change until late in the American War of Independence when Marquess of Rockingham replaced Lord North as the Prime Minister.

The British and French signed the Treaty of Paris on 10 February 1763, ending the Seven Years War. The Seven Years War was a profitable victory for the British and the treaty greatly expanded the British Empire. The British now controlled India, parts of the Caribbean, trading posts in Africa, and expanded their territory in North America to include Canada and Florida. While the British gained valuable resources in these territories, they also gained the responsibility of protecting their newly acquired territory.⁶⁹

Control over foreign territories was not a concern for the British in 1763. They had the strongest navy in the world, following the Seven Years War, and other European naval powers – France and Spain – suffered a severe degradation of naval power during the war. Naval power allowed Britain to control trade routes and defend their colonies against other European powers. The success of the Seven Years War also brought a sense of arrogance throughout the British

McMaster (New York: Routledge, 2009), 68.

⁶⁹ Simms, *Three Victories and a Defeat*, 502.

government and military. Britain had now become one of the most powerful states in Europe and arguably the most resource rich with the diversity of its colonies. Due to British success during the Seven Years War, powerful naval and economic position, they largely withdrew diplomatically from Europe. Fredrick the Great once said that “England does not need any foreign help...she is only worried about naval power and her possessions in America.” Britain was slipping into a position of diplomatic isolationism that would later prove to be costly.⁷⁰

Following the Seven Years War, European states were realigning and forming new alliances. Russia became allies with Prussia and Denmark, forming a powerful alliance. The Hapsburg Monarchy continued to strengthen their position and remained allies of France. The Bourbon powers – France and Spain – were investing in rebuilding their navies and cultivating relationships with Sweden, Poland, and the Ottoman Empire. Britain, who had been heavily involved in European affairs earlier in the eighteenth century, sat on the sidelines. In 1764, Britain had no true allies in Europe and did nothing to try to change its position.⁷¹

In 1766, the British realized their position in European affairs. King George III nominated William Pitt to be the Prime Minister. Pitt was an aggressive political leader and George III thought his aggressive nature could garner allies in Europe. Pitt tried hard to create a “Northern Alliance” with Russia and Prussia, but it was a failed effort. European powers were well aware of the continuing tension between Britain and France. Catherine the Great feared that an alliance with Britain would inevitably lead to Russian involvement in a Franco-British War and Prussia distained Britain due to perceived mistreatment during the Seven Years War. The effort to establish European allies failed. This was the last serious effort Britain made to secure European support until after the American War of Independence.⁷²

⁷⁰ Simms, *Three Victories and a Defeat*, 545.

⁷¹ Dull, *A Diplomatic History of the American Revolution*, 16-28.

⁷² Simms, *Three Victories and a Defeat*, 546-548.

French leaders were well aware of British struggles in Europe and the growing unrest in the American Colonies. Duc de Choiseul, the French Foreign Minister, took notice of Britain's struggle in America and predicted that the colonist would eventually rebel against the British.⁷³ Throughout the 1760s, France sent agents to America to try to establish discreet diplomatic relationships with American politicians.⁷⁴ British leaders were cognizant of the French fascination towards the American colonies, but due to their overwhelming naval superiority did not think that France or Spain were a serious threat to British interests. King George III was primarily concerned with the continued civil unrest and persistent Indian threat.⁷⁵ Duc de Choiseul, however, was looking for British vulnerability and the situation in the American colonies presented an opportunity for France.

Charles Gravier Comte de Vergennes became the French Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs in 1774. Vergennes firmly believed that France should be the premier power in Europe and the protector of the balance of power on the continent. Vergennes, unlike the British, looked to establish this through a balanced approach; pursuing diplomatic relationships in Europe, while continuing to build the French navy in anticipation of a naval show down with the British. While Vergennes reached out to European allies, he was very much a realist; he believed conflict among Europe powers was inevitable. Vergennes was aware of the growing unrest in the American colonies and sought to exploit Britain's vulnerable position, while keeping conflict away from the French shores. The British situation in the American colonies was growing worse by the summer of 1775.⁷⁶

⁷³ Mackesy, *The War for America*, 2.

⁷⁴ Dull, *A Diplomatic History of the American Revolution*, 9.

⁷⁵ Eliga H. Gould and Peter S. Onuf, eds., *Empire and Nation: The American Revolution in the Atlantic World*, repr. ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), 23.

⁷⁶ Orville T. Murphy, "The View from Versailles," *Diplomacy and the Revolution: The Franco-American Alliance of 1778*, eds. Peter J. Albert and Ronald Hoffman (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1981), 109-115.

It was during this period that the colonies began to engage with Europe as a quasi-independent state. In early 1775, the colonies had representatives in London, but they represented individual colonies, not the colonies as a whole or the Continental Congress. On 29 November 1775, the Continental Congress created the Committee of Secret Correspondence. The mission of the Committee of Secret Correspondence was to engage European powers and seek outside support for the colonies. Arthur Lee, a Virginian physician, was already serving in London as a representative of Massachusetts. The Committee of Secret Correspondence instructed Lee to engage European powers to determine if they would support an independent America. This was the beginning of what would prove to be an effective diplomatic effort on behalf of the American colonies.⁷⁷

The British monitored European affairs, but made little effort to engage their European rivals on the subject of the American colonies. Early in the war, Germain was convinced that there was no real threat from either France or Spain entering the conflict and the ministry focused European engagement on finding troops to support the war effort in America.⁷⁸ British military success in 1776, confirmed these beliefs. General Howe successfully regained control of New York and expanded British authority to New Jersey and Rhode Island. British strategic leaders believed the British Army would defeat the rebellion, in the spring of 1777, based on the Continental Army's poor performance at New York.

While the British were victorious militarily in 1776, the colonist expanded their diplomatic efforts in Europe, unopposed by any opposition from British diplomats. On 02 July 1776, the Continental Congress voted to dissolve their relationship with Great Britain and on 04 July 1776, they signed the Declaration of Independence. Although the signing of the Declaration

⁷⁷ Bemis, *The Diplomacy of the American Revolution*, 31, 33.

⁷⁸ Germain to Irwin, 13 September 1775, *Report on the Manuscripts of Mrs. Stopford-Sackville of Drayton House*, 137.

of Independence was a symbolic event for the Americans, European states were hesitant to recognize the United States. The idea of a republic was scary to many monarchs – Russia, the Netherlands, and Prussia – and European powers who had colonial interest were concerned that the phenomenon of insurrection could spread to their colonies. Nevertheless, Vergennes viewed the Declaration of Independence as an opportunity and was eager to assist the fledgling nation fight the British.⁷⁹

Vergennes saw the British in a vulnerable position, but was concerned that King George III, understanding Britain's situation, would open negotiations with the Americans. He did not want France to commit to a war with Britain if the potential for a settlement in America existed. A settlement with the rebellion would allow Britain to concentrate its military means on France. 24 September 1776, Vergennes made an agreement with Arthur Lee that the Americans would inform France before any negotiations with the crown took place. This agreement was a strong indicator of French intentions to enter the war.⁸⁰ Once the conditions were right, the French planned to enter the American War of Independence, providing direct military support to the American rebellion.

In addition to France, American diplomats also tried to convince Spain to wage war on Britain. Vergennes pledged French support, but American diplomats were hoping for the support of both Bourbon powers. Spain refused to recognize America as an independent state. King Charles III was concerned that recognizing an independent American could cause rebellion in Spain's colonial possessions. In March 1777, Arthur Lee traveled to Spain, warning the Spanish court that if Britain managed to reclaim America it would significantly shift the balance of power in Europe and Britain would become a hegemonic power. American diplomats understood European powers, whose greatest fear was a dominate British Empire without peer. The rationale

⁷⁹ Bemis, *The Diplomacy of the American Revolution*, 113-116.

⁸⁰ Dull, *A Diplomatic History of the American Revolution*, 50-57.

of a hegemonic British power was not convincing enough to get Spain to enter into a Spanish-Franco-American alliance, but it did leave an impression on the Spanish court. Meanwhile, the French, who were already supporting the war effort, were trying to determine if the time was right to enter the American War of Independence.⁸¹

Entering into a Franco-American alliance and declaring war on Britain was not an easy decision for France. Emotionally, Louis XVI and Vergennes wanted nothing more than to take advantage of the protracted war that trapped Britain; however, entering in an overseas conflict had its costs. Financially, the war would be costly to France and the French economy had still not recovered from the Seven Years War. It would also legitimize republicanism, a dangerous proposition for a monarchy. With risk, there was also reward in the form of restoring French territories in America and forging trading partnerships; assuming the Americans gained independence. The French had to determine if entering into another international conflict was in the best interest of the country.⁸²

In December 1777, American diplomats in Paris – Benjamin Franklin, Silas Deane, and Arthur Lee – received notification of Burgoyne’s surrender at the Battles of Saratoga in September. Vergennes’s representative, Conrad-Alexandre Gerard, met with the Americans in mid-December and began to negotiate a treaty that included both a commercial and military alliance. Encouraged by the American diplomats, Vergennes’s sought Spanish involvement in the alliance, but once again Spain would not enter into a treaty with the Americans. Conde de Floridablanca, the newly appointed Spanish minister of state, encouraged King Charles III to stay neutral. Floridablanca was worried about an independent United States threatening Spanish

⁸¹ Simms, *Three Victories and a Defeat*, 606.

⁸² Lawrence S. Kaplan, “The Treaties of Paris and Washington, 1778 and 1949: Reflections on Entangling Alliances,” *Diplomacy and Revolution: The Franco-American Alliance of 1778*, eds. Peter J. Albert and Ronald Hoffman (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1981), 155.

possessions in the West Indies and Central and South America. He also felt that if Spain entered the war, it would leave Spanish colonies vulnerable to British attack. With the Spanish Navy still rebuilding, Floridablanca was concerned Spain lacked the capability to defend its colonies.⁸³ The Spanish reluctance to enter the war disappointed Vergennes and the American diplomats, but they proceeded with the alliance without Spain. Before agreeing on a Franco-American alliance, Benjamin Franklin sent one more letter to the British parliament to request full American independence – a drastically different request than representation in parliament. When the crown rejected the offer, the Americans and French signed the Treaty of Alliance on 06 February 1778.⁸⁴

While Germain and King George III remained committed to subduing the rebellion, Lord North was desperately searching for an alternative to an inevitable global war without European allies. Lord North petitioned King George III to reconcile with the Continental Congress. The King would not allow independence or an option of self-rule, but did open the option of representation in Parliament. Lord North, with approval from King George III, sent a group of negotiators to America in the spring of 1778. The negotiators, known as the Carlisle Peace Commission, drafted a proposal allowing American representation in parliament. The proposed peace treaty failed; American strategic aims changed significantly since 1775. Representation was no longer a potential middle ground. The Americans now wanted independence and with French support secured and recent military success, the Americans had no reason to believe independence was not achievable.⁸⁵

Britain further alienated itself from Europe by instituting a naval policy to blockade French ports. The intent of the blockade was to prevent France from receiving naval stores from

⁸³ Cummins, *Spanish Observers and the American Revolution*, 56-57.

⁸⁴ Dull, *A Diplomatic History of the American Revolution*, 159-161

⁸⁵ O'Shaughnessy, *The Men Who Lost America*, 32-33, 61-62.

Scandinavian countries. In the summer of 1778, the Royal Navy began to intercept all ships bound for France, even ships from neutral states, such as the Netherlands. The Royal Navy seized any goods that they deemed could be for military purposes, infuriating the Netherlands. Although Britain had blockaded America since 1775, neutral shipping countries generally accepted this practice because America was a British colony. Now Britain was denying commerce between independent European states. Once again, the British turned to coercive measures with no diplomatic effort.⁸⁶

On 03 September 1783, Great Britain and America signed the Treat of Paris officially ending the American War of Independence. France and Spain signed a separate agreement on the same day in Versailles. The American colonies were now officially independent, but despite the freedom from Britain, Britain remained their strongest trading partner. The British retained their possessions in the West Indies and became economically stronger than they were before the War. The French on the other hand, avenged their defeat in the Seven Years War, but emerged from the American War of Independence with financial and domestic problems. Soon afterwards, the French Revolution drastically changed the state, eventually giving rise to Napoleon Bonaparte.⁸⁷

Analysis: An Unbalanced Strategy, Reliant On Hard Power

Ultimately, Britain failed to prevent the French from intervening in the American War of Independence. The British adopted a strategy to subdue the American Colonies reliant solely on hard power. The crown, ministry, and senior military leaders all believed that military force alone could quickly defeat the rebellion and keep the conflict contained to a civil war. They ignored the possibility of European intervention during the initial stages of the conflict. In Europe, British

⁸⁶ David Syrett, *Neutral Rights and the War in the Narrow Seas, 1778-82* (Ft. Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute, 1986), 1-7.

⁸⁷ Dull, *A Diplomatic History of the American Revolution*, 159-161.

statesmen were unable to counter American diplomats' skillful engagement with European powers. As the war escalated, British leaders never reframed their operational approach despite significant changes to the operational environment. Additionally, British leaders never really understood the operational environment in the Americas; they failed to understand the cultural differences between the American colonies and other British colonial possessions.

The most significant fault of the British strategy was the reliance on hard power. The British strategy employed coercive and brute force measures throughout the war with little attempt at diplomatic resolutions until after French intervention. The British employed coercive taxes, naval blockades, and military occupation without incorporating diplomacy into their strategy – both in the American colonies and in Europe. Attempts at leveraging soft power were insincere and symbolic; Germain and George delegated the authority to negotiate to the Howe Brothers and later to General Clinton, but they had no real authority to reach a meaningful agreement. The military leaders' authority was limited to exonerating rebels once they swore allegiance back to the crown.⁸⁸ It was not until after the British defeat at Saratoga that the ministry sent diplomats with real authority – the Carlisle Commission – to the colonies. The lack of authority and the staunch strategic aims established by the crown limited the ability of British military and political leaders to accomplish meaningful objectives with soft power.

Diplomatically, British officials were severely restrained by George's and Germain's unwavering stance on the colonies. George would accept nothing less than unconditional surrender of the Continental Army and sworn allegiance to the crown by the American colonies. Any ceded control he believed would be seen as weakness by rival European powers and other British colonies. If Britain lost control of the American colonies, George thought that rebellion would spread to other British colonies, specifically the economically valuable Caribbean.⁸⁹ The

⁸⁸ O'Shaughnessy, *The Men Who Lost America*, 60.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 29-30.

king's position left little room to negotiate. Lord North, pursued secret negotiations with Benjamin Franklin, but the effort was useless; Lord North had nothing to offer. He did not have the authority to grant representation in Parliament or independence, the only two acceptable outcomes for the American rebellion.⁹⁰

Meanwhile American diplomats were outmaneuvering the British at every step. In 1776, American diplomats were engaged in Paris and Vienna. In Paris, Franklin lobbied for French military assistance, while diplomats in Vienna sought to deny the British future use of German mercenaries. These efforts were well received, but European powers were hesitant to provide assistance if the American Colonies were still "loyal" to the crown. The Declaration of Independence was the first step to American independence, but it was the Articles of Confederation, in November 1777, that solidified the global view of an independent America. These documents ultimately marked a diplomatic transition that went unrecognized by the British. America was now operating as an independent state. Britain's withdrawal from European affairs resulted in American dominance of the diplomatic contest in Europe.⁹¹

One of Britain's most significant strategic shortcomings was its policy towards the Netherlands. In 1779, the Netherlands was the only European power that had a neutral relationship with Britain. In the 1770s, the Dutch expanded their interstate commerce and openly traded with much of Europe, to include ship building material and military goods. Britain made diplomatic efforts to stop Dutch shipping, requesting that they halt the shipment of goods that could be used in war making. When the Dutch rejected British diplomatic efforts, Britain immediately resorted to military means to stop the trade between the Netherlands and France. Britain began to intercept Dutch merchant ships; driving them to join Catherine the Great's neutral shipping alliance. In 1780, Britain declared war on the Netherlands, the one power they

⁹⁰ O'Shaughnessy, *The Men Who Lost America*, 55.

⁹¹ Simms, *Europe*, 128-129.

had a neutral relationship with in Europe.⁹² The Netherlands had no interest in the American colonies and was more concerned with the recent French annexation of Corsica. Instead of placating the Dutch, Britain now pulled an additional European power into the American War of Independence.⁹³

While diplomatic complacency in Europe crippled British strategic efforts, failure to understand the American colonies and the evolving operational environment prevented Britain from employing a viable strategy to quickly subdue the rebellion and isolate the conflict. British preconceived views on colonial possessions played a critical role in the failure to understand the operational environment in American colonies. The ministry and the crown's policy was to subdue colonial rebellion with force. The British belief that colonial rebellion could be subdued with military force was well founded. The British used military force prior, ending the Jacobite rebellion and subduing anti-Hanover settlements in Ireland and Britain in the early eighteenth century, but the American colonies were different.⁹⁴

Parliament adopted similar policies for all British colonies, failing to take into consideration cultural differences in the American colonies. A clear example of this is the difference between the British West Indies and the American colonies. The economy of both colonies was agrarian – tobacco in the Americas, sugar in the West Indies – and both were located in a relatively similar geographical region. The significant difference was the residence of the British elite. In the West Indies, British sugar planters' permanent residence was in Britain. In the American colonies, American was their permanent home. This made a big difference in the way the political elite viewed representation in parliament and coercive tax measure.⁹⁵

⁹² Dull, *A Diplomatic History of the American Revolution*, 91-92.

⁹³ Bemis, *The Diplomacy of the American Revolution*, 116.

⁹⁴ Simms, *Three Victories and a Defeat*, 99-101.

⁹⁵ O'Shaughnessy, *An Empire Divided*, 3, 15-17.

British leaders from all branches of government never really understood the American rebellion.⁹⁶ British leaders struggled throughout the war to identify the American center of gravity and develop a unified operational approach.⁹⁷ British operations in 1777 demonstrated the lack of consent on the rebellion's center of gravity. Burgoyne viewed the rebellious population in New England as the rebellion's source of power. Howe wavered on whether it was the Continental Army or Philadelphia and the Continental Congress, eventually deciding it was the Congress. Meanwhile, Germain remained indifferent and failed to build a comprehensive strategy and direct his generals' actions towards a common center of gravity. The result was a disjointed campaign that led to Burgoyne's defeat at Saratoga and Howe achieving an empty victory, seizing a "congress-less" Philadelphia. At no point in the war did the British view American diplomacy, as a source of power, but arguably American diplomacy is what ultimately won the war for the Americans.

From 1775 to 1778, British leaders never reframed their understanding of the operational environment in the American colonies. Germain and George held onto the belief that the British military could defeat the rebellion solely with brute force, despite the inability of British forces to engage the Continental Army in a decisive battle. Popular support for the rebellion grew as well, and Britain never modified its strategy to the changing conditions. Military leaders continued to target areas that they felt had a strong Loyalist population, but never were able to effectively arm, organize, and employ Loyalists. Furthermore, with the threat of American irregular forces Loyalist governments struggled to hold power, even in the southern colonies.⁹⁸

In hindsight, the years after the Seven Years War were the decisive operation in terms of

⁹⁶ Herrera, "The King's Friends," 115.

⁹⁷ Joint Publication (JP 5-0), *Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2011), xxi. Center of Gravity is defined in JP 5-0 as a "source of power that provides moral and physical strength, freedom of action or will to act".

⁹⁸ O'Shaughnessy, *The Men Who Lost America*, 29-30.

strategy for the American War of Independence. This period set the conditions, both politically and militarily, to prepare the British for the war. Britain's failure to secure allies in Europe during its "cold war" with France, allowed France to be able to rebuild its navy and focus on war preparation unopposed. The French lacked a European threat in the 1760s and 1770s, allowing them to concentrate their efforts on avenging their loss in the Seven Years War. The British inability to subdue the rebellion in a timely manner allowed France to take advantage of the escalating conflict in America.

In 1778, Britain gave France the war it wanted; Vergennes was able to wage war on Britain without bringing conflict to the French homeland. Britain even helped Vergennes secure allies by drawing Spain into the war and declaring war on the Netherlands. By 1780, Spain and the Netherlands were at war with Britain and British colonies all over the world were vulnerable to attack. The Royal Navy was overstretched in the early stages of the war, but French intervention and the subsequent entry of Spain and the Netherlands exasperated the problem. Guarding Britain, providing convoy security, securing the West Indies, supporting the Army, and attempting to blockade the American coastline was too much for the Royal Navy. The dispersion of the army – America, Caribbean, Gibraltar, West Africa, and India – created additional logistical struggles for the British and a heavy workload on the Navy.⁹⁹

The British position in Europe forced them to rely on their navy to protect their colonial possessions and keep the British Empire intact. Following the Seven Years War the British did not see counterinsurgency as one of their potential missions. British leaders thought that rebellions could easily be isolated and defeated with a small number of professionally trained European soldiers. They greatly underestimated the organization and resolve of the Americans and the vast territory of the American colonies. They also underestimated the diplomatic skill employed by the Americans and their ability to garner support from Europe.

⁹⁹ O'Shaughnessy, *The Men Who Lost America*, 356-357.

Conclusion: Operational Loss, but a Strategic Victory

Future armed conflict will be complex, in part, because threats, enemies, and adversaries are becoming increasingly capable and elusive. State and nonstate actors employ traditional, unconventional, and hybrid strategies that threaten U.S. security and vital interests.

-The U.S. Army Operating Concept: Win in a Complex World

In the Army Operating Concept, the United States Army asserts that the contemporary operating environment is more complex than the environment military and diplomatic practitioners operated in previously. The American War of Independence contradicts that idea, demonstrating all the same complexities that practitioners face today.¹⁰⁰ The British faced a hybrid military opponent – Continental Army, American militia, privateers and eventually the French, Spanish, and Dutch – domestic pressure from political elites and Parliament, and a complex international system.¹⁰¹ Non-state actors, such as the East India Company and British West Indies sugar planters, also influenced British strategy. These multi-national corporations played a significant role in the decision to tax the American colonies and injected special interest into Parliament. This complex environment made developing a viable strategy to keep France from intervening and isolating the conflict to a British civil war unlikely.

When examining the American War of Independence it is easy to find fault in the British strategy and their failure to recognize crucial transitions. Elliot Cohen and John Gooch assert that there are three basic kinds of military failure: “failure to learn, failure to anticipate, and failure to adapt”.¹⁰² In the American War of Independence, the British failed at each of these, but the failure

¹⁰⁰ Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) Pamphlet 525-3-1. *The U.S. Army Operating Concept: Win in a Complex World* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2014), 15.

¹⁰¹ John McCuen, “Hybrid Wars,” *Military Review* 88, No. 2 (March-April 2008): 112.

¹⁰² Eliot A. Cohen and John Gooch, *Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 26.

to anticipate and adapt prevented them from isolating the conflict and countering American diplomatic efforts in Europe. British leaders understood their position of isolationism in Europe, but did nothing to adapt to the evolving strategic environment. British naval policies in the latter part of the war further distanced Britain from the possibility of securing allies, allowing France the freedom to wage war on Britain away from French shores, accomplishing Vergennes' intent. As the conflict escalated in the Americas, British commanders failed to reframe their operational approach, despite their struggle to defeat the rebellion. Britain's inability to adapt to changing conditions influenced their lack of anticipation of pending French intervention. Despite numerous indicators that suggested French intentions to intervene, Germain and Lord North still failed to anticipate the expansion of the conflict until it was highly probable in 1778. Whether French intervention was unavoidable or not, the British strategy to avoid a global conflict was disjointed and one-dimensional. It relied on coercion and brute force exclusively, ignoring diplomatic efforts by the Americans and European foreign affairs.

French intervention was the major transition of the American War of Independence for the British. It forced the British into a global conflict that threatened the survival of the British Empire. Nevertheless, the British Empire survived. The protracted conflict did not only affect Britain, but had a negative effect on France as well. By 1782, Vergennes was also looking for a way to end the conflict while maintaining French honor. France was struggling to support the war financially and despite the initial French military success, by 1782, Britain had regained the initiative. British forces were successful in defending the Empire in India, continued to hold Canada, and maintained the British colonies in the West Indies. European intervention did not force the British to abandon the prospect of keeping the American colonies under the crown; lack of popular support and the war's cost caused Parliament and the Rockingham ministry to search for an end to the protracted conflict.¹⁰³

¹⁰³ O'Shaughnessy, *The Men Who Lost America*, 359-361.

Britain lost the possibility of maintaining possession of the American colonies, but ultimately won a strategic victory. France was bankrupt and Spain had failed to seize Gibraltar. In the aftermath of the American War of Independence, the United States of America became an important trading partner with Britain. Britain remained a naval power and regained control of the Atlantic by the mid-1780s. America, meanwhile, struggled to find unity in its fledgling government and still faced threats from Indian tribes, Spanish colonies, and even the French.¹⁰⁴ While, French intervention created a serious threat to the British Empire, the American War of Independence demonstrates the continuous nature of strategy. Despite failing to prevent French intervention and losing control of the American colonies, the British emerged in an advantageous position compared to the other belligerents in the American War of Independence. .

¹⁰⁴ Simms, *Europe*, 136-137.

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